

# TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN?

*The Female Face of  
Right-wing Populism  
and Extremism*

06

*Case Study Italy*

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## TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN? THE STUDY SERIES

All over the world, right-wing populist parties continue to grow stronger, as has been the case for a number of years – a development that is male-dominated in most countries, with right-wing populists principally elected by men. However, a new generation of women is also active in right-wing populist parties and movements – forming the female face of right-wing populism, so to speak. At the same time, these parties are rapidly closing the gap when it comes to support from female voters – a new phenomenon, for it was long believed that women tend to be rather immune to right-wing political propositions. Which gender and family policies underpin this and which societal trends play a part? Is it possible that women are coming out triumphant here?

That is a question that we already raised, admittedly playing devil's advocate, in the first volume of the publication, published in 2018 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung *Triumph of the women? The Female Face of the Far Right in Europe*. We are now continuing this first volume with a series of detailed studies published at irregular intervals. This is partly in response to the enormous interest that this collection of research has aroused to date in the general public and in professional circles. As a foundation with roots in social democracy, from the outset one of our crucial concerns has been to monitor anti-democratic tendencies and developments, while also providing information about these, with a view to strengthening an open and democratic society thanks to these insights.

The *Triumph of the women?* study series adopts a specific perspective in this undertaking: The country-specific studies examine right-wing populist (and occasionally right-wing extremist) parties and their programmes concerning family and gender policy. The analysis highlights the question of which political propositions appeal to women voters, making parties in the right-wing spectrum seem electable in their eyes. How do antifeminist positions gain ground? In addition, individual gender policy topics are examined, the percentage of votes attained by these parties is analysed and the role of female leaders and counter-movements is addressed.

While the first volume of studies focused on countries within Europe, the new study adopts a broader view and analyses individual countries and topics worldwide. Where do right-wing populist parties manage to shift the focus of discourse or even shape debates on family and gender policy, in addition to defining the terms of engagement when dealing with issues relating to flight and migration? And do their propositions concerning social policy respond to the needs of broad swathes of the electorate for greater social welfare?

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is important to us that progressive stakeholders agree on these challenges and work together to combat the growing fragmentation and divisions within our societies.

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## CASE STUDY

### ITALY

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// At the end of 2020, opinion polls clearly depict the rise and strength of the Italian far-right. The two main representatives of this party family, the League<sup>1</sup>—formerly Northern League—and the post-fascist Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli di Italia*), jointly gather the support of more than 40 per cent of Italian voters<sup>2</sup>. As we shall see, the Italian party system is familiar with the presence of far-right and populist radical right parties. However, the current turn of events are potentially inaugurating a new phase of polarisation in which far-right parties are not only becoming normalised and increasingly integrated in the party system (Akkerman, De Lange and Rooduijn 2016) but are about to become the most relevant and influential actors, with the concrete possibility of competing for government in next election round. //

<sup>1</sup> The party »the League for Salvini Premier«, shortened to the »League«, is a sister party founded by the Northern League leader Matteo Salvini in December 2017. It was founded as part of a strategy to give the party a national appeal, without the regional focus that characterised the Northern League. Also, the creation of a new organisation was deemed necessary after some corruption scandals involving the misuse of public party funding affected the Northern League, leaving it heavily indebted with the Italian state. The two parties, which simultaneously exist at the time of writing, basically share the same organisational structure so we will refer to both of them as the League throughout the text.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.youtrend.it/2020/12/18/supermedia-dei-sondaggi-politici-17-dicembre-calano-lega-m5s-e-fi/> (last accessed 15.03.2021).

In this study, we focus on both parties: the Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, or FdI) and the League (*Lega*). Their programmatic and ideological evolution in the last few years has made them prominent members of the populist radical right (PRR) party family in Europe, combining ideational elements of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn et al. 2019). As in other countries, both actors have been progressively mainstreamed (Akkerman, De Lange and Rooduijn 2016) since the 1990s. In fact, both parties—in the case of FdI its predecessor National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*, AN)—profited from the deep rupture in the political system that occurred in the 1990s, which led to the first and more profound restructuring experienced by the Italian party system. As a consequence of the end of the Cold War, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the second biggest party in the country, dissolved and reshaped its political identity under the banner of the newly-formed Party of the Left Democrats (PDS)<sup>3</sup>. Further, a judiciary investigation exposed a vast web of bribes and kickbacks involving the major governing parties, the centre-right Christian Democracy (DC) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), both of which subsequently fell apart. Thus, by the time of the 1994 national elections, the three largest parties that had dominated the scene since WWII had disappeared. This created favourable conditions for a resurgence of the far-right, spared from the corruption scandals, and for the emergence of political outsiders on the right, which were able to capture the electorate's disillusionment with established parties. Since then, the two far-right parties have progressively gained support and entered the mainstream, especially thanks to their inclusion in the right-wing electoral alliance with Silvio Berlusconi's party, *Forza Italia* (Go Italy). Fast forwarding to 2018, both parties contested in the national elections in the same electoral coalition. After the elections, the League, without the support of the other allies, played a key role in the formation of one of the first European »populist governments«, together with the populist Five Star Movement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The new party blended social democracy and liberal pro-Europeanism, following the example of other social democratic parties such as the German SPD.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/31/italy-populist-leaders-strike-deal-resurrect-coalition> (last accessed 12.08.2020).

Besides the convergent trajectory, the two parties have different origins (see Ruzza and Fella 2009). The League—the Northern League at that time—was founded in 1991, resulting from the unification of pre-existing regional parties (leagues) that had emerged towards the end of the 1970s in some regions of northern Italy, following the institutional establishment of Italian regions, all of which supported regional autonomy and, more generally, a decentralising agenda. These parties became particularly strong in Lombardy and Veneto, which to date remain the strongholds of the party. The League, in its early days, can be suitably defined as an ethno-regionalist party (Tronconi 2009). It claimed cultural and political autonomy for »Padania«—an imagined nation that encompasses most of the Italian regions in the North, artfully created by this political actor to legitimise its autonomist claims (Mudde 2007: 73). Claims for regional autonomy were based on economic and redistributive matters, well summarised in one of the most iconic slogans of the party—»thieving Rome«—as well as a good deal of ethnic chauvinism against the Italian South that exalted regional-based nationalism—the Padanian people versus the lazy, dishonest Southerners. After a series of scandals which brought about the indictment of its founder and leader Umberto Bossi in 2011 and a substantial loss in electoral support, the League gradually distanced itself from its regionalist origins, adopting a truly national-populist appeal and at the same time reinforcing its radical right wing character. This ideological realignment, under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini, contributed to gaining voters' support on a national scale—something that the old Northern League had never achieved (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018).

The FdI was founded in 2012 and is the direct successor party of the National Alliance, the main far-right party represented in parliament since the 1990s, which was in itself the successor of the Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI), the party that after World War II inherited the legacy of fascism as a political system and an ideology (Ruzza 2018).

The governing alliance between the two parties already dissolved in the summer of 2019. The League joined the parliamentary opposition while the Five Star Movement formed another government coalition with the Democratic Party (the biggest centre-left party in the Italian party system).

The Fdl revived many programmatic elements of the Italian far-right that went under the radar when its predecessor party AN created an electoral alliance with the centre-right liberal party Go Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI), led by Silvio Berlusconi, which later resulted in the merging of the two parties in 2009. However, the merger was short-lived, as the two parties separated again in 2012. Programmatic claims by the Fdl included, for example, providing increased welfare support for (ethnically-defined) Italians and promoting »family values« and law-and-order policies. Going beyond policy, this tradition is also pursued symbolically, for example, through keeping the Tricolor Flame in the party logo—an identification marker of the Italian far right.<sup>5</sup> Notably, the Fdl is the only Italian party led by a female leader, Giorgia Meloni, elected in 2014.

Notwithstanding the differences in the two parties' trajectories, they found common ground with agendas based on anti-immigration policies and populist stances, law-and-order, and the defence of Italian value and traditions.<sup>6</sup> In this latter aspect, the defence of the »natural« (heteronormative) family is one of the core tenets. In addition, the two parties display other common features, already observed in current studies on right-wing populism and gender, which Dietze and Roth have labelled as a sort of »obsession for gender« (2020:8): the aversion to sex education, the critique of so-called »gender ideology«, an understanding of gender based on biologically-based and binary differences, the rejection of same-sex marriage as the ultimate threat to the natural family, and a restrictive stance on reproductive rights.

The aim of this study is to present an overview of how the League and the Fdl perform from a gender perspective. In the following, we will review how gender and women-related policy positions are framed in election manifestos and in leaders' public statements. We will then consider women's participation in, and women's support for, the two parties. It is usually assumed that men are overrepresented in far-right politics, both in the

<sup>5</sup> In a recent interview, the leader of the party, Giorgia Meloni, declared that their purpose back in 2012 was to recreate the Italian right, and »provide shelter« to all Italians who identify with this project. Interview available on the Fdl official YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOxrD6TihXU> (last accessed 12.6.2020).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, in late 2015 both parties opposed new legislation granting legal recognition to civil partnerships and adoption rights to homosexuals (Ruzza 2018).

parties and in providing electoral support. In Western European contexts, this assumption is becoming visibly more and more untenable: women are increasingly involved in far-right parties and often hold leadership positions—the Italian Giorgia Meloni is a fitting example for this trend—while at the same time the gender gap in voting support seems to have waned. We will conclude by enlarging our focus to include the broader movement and counter-movement dynamics that involve PRR parties and their strategic alliance with networks of religious actors on the one hand, and the progressive responses put in place by the feminist movement(s) and social-democratic, leftist forces on the other. In doing so, we shed light on how feminist movements and minor parties from the left constitute the progressive vanguard fighting against the rise of PRR parties' conservative agenda on gender, in the absence of a significant response from mainstream social-democratic forces.

### Women and gender policies in the League and the Fdl

As noted by Cas Mudde the »far right's views on gender (and sexuality) are, first and foremost, shaped by their nativism« (2019: 157). The analysis of the official positions of the two parties clearly confirms this trend. The two parties have a very similar agenda concerning women's and gender issues, and they share substantial framings based on their nativist world view. In analysing the party manifestos drafted for recent national and European elections (2013, 2018 and 2019 respectively), we found relevant differences in the degree of attention devoted to women's and gender issues by the two parties. Whereas the League touches upon these themes more extensively, the Fdl does so less often, at the same time presenting somewhat more conservative positions, in particular concerning reproductive rights.

#### At the Core of the Gender Agenda: Family and Natality

As noted by Grzebalska and Pető, in far-right discourse the centrality of familialism<sup>7</sup> emerges as »a form of biopolitics which views the traditional family as a foundation of the nation, and subjugates individual reproductive and

<sup>7</sup> The definition of *familialism* is given in Kemper (2016).

self-determination rights (of women in particular) to the normative demand of the reproduction of the nation« (2018: 167). Unsurprisingly, this is also the case for the League and the Fdl. An important element emerging from official statements and policy documents is the centrality attributed to the traditional—heteronormative—family, clearly influenced by the parties' nativist ideology. The League 2018 manifesto offers a clear example: the family is defined as »the place of fundamental ties, the primary nucleus of the community, the cradle of new life, the protagonist of the process of collective development; it is in all respects the first economic entity of society. It is also the primary site for education, care and childcare«. <sup>8</sup> Family is conceived as the central unit for social reproduction and, as such, as the foundation of the Italian nation. Accordingly, the »demographic crisis«, namely the low birth rate recorded among Italian women, is clearly understood in party programmes as a threat to the future of the nation. For the parties, both the massive immigrant integration and the economic recession induced by the 2008 economic crisis are to be blamed for the demographic crisis.<sup>9</sup> In other words, people with migration backgrounds and poor economic performance are identified as factors hampering the natural development of traditional families and the services they provide to the broader nation.

In 2018, the list of threats to the natural family was broadened to include »gender ideology«, which was mentioned for the first time in the 2018 Fdl Manifesto.<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, the fight against gender ideology, framed as such, is a new entry in the parties' discourses, which is attributable to the strategic alliances with Catholic conservatism. Even though the strategic element should not be underestimated, the attacks on

<sup>8</sup> See: *Lega Nord*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018. Original manifestos were retrieved by the MARPOR website and are available at this page: [https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp\\_dashboard\\_dataset/](https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp_dashboard_dataset/) (last accessed on 19.2.2021). Original quote in Italian: »La famiglia è la società naturale fondata sull'unione tra uomo e donna, come recepito dalla Costituzione Italiana. La famiglia è il luogo dei legami fondamentali, nucleo primario della comunità, è culla di nuova vita, è protagonista del processo di sviluppo collettivo ed è a tutti gli effetti il primo soggetto economico della società. E' di essa, inoltre, il ruolo primario dell'educazione, della cura e della presa in carico dei figli.« (translation by the authors).

<sup>9</sup> See: Fratelli d'Italia, electoral manifesto national elections 2018; *Lega Nord*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018. See footnote 8 for link to the sources.

<sup>10</sup> *Fratelli d'Italia*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018.

gender ideology find their ideological justification in the party's nativism and extreme conservatism.<sup>11</sup> For the Fdl, contrasting gender ideology is a battle over—and to preserve—Italian identity. According to the party, gender-neutral and non-discriminatory language are the attempt to water down some of the central tenets of Italian value system—the family, traditional gender roles in the private and public sphere—that most Italians share and identify with, to the sole advantage of a minoritarian community in collaboration with the elites. The Fdl, more so than the League, opposes such perceived threats.

As a solution to the problem of the demographic crisis, the League and the Fdl propose policies and welfare interventions that materially benefit traditional families, aimed at favouring higher birth rates. For example, both parties apply demographic criteria to economic decisions, resulting in a vast array of benefits, from tax cuts on childcare's products to baby grants for each new-born, to support young couples in building large families, provided that they are composed of Italian citizens. The support for families is a transversal issue advocated across different policy fields. In illustrating an intervention in the labour market, both parties stress the importance of providing working conditions that favour a work-life balance for young mothers, including a reduction of tax contributions for a period of nine months for each of the first three children. Aside from the centrality of family, what also emerges clearly is that both parties hold »modern traditional« views of women, in which working women are tolerated, and supported, as far as their childrearing responsibilities are also performed (Mudde 2019). The predominance of the »mothers« frame with regard to women is clear in the parties' policy agenda: the majority of policy interventions addressing women tend to consider them as the primary caregivers within the family. The natural role of women as caregivers is also implied in the pension reform proposed by the League, which is labelled »Woman Option«. <sup>12</sup> This reform allows female employees in the private and public sectors, as well as those self-employed, to retire

<sup>11</sup> *Fratelli d'Italia*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> See: *Lega Nord*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018. See footnote 8 for link to the source.

earlier than the regular pension age.<sup>13</sup> Even though an overall reform of the pension system figured among the party's programmatic points during the 2018 election campaign, the leader of the League, Salvini, welcomed »Woman Option« as a way to grant women their right to be grandmothers. In the context of an Italian familialist welfare system (Saraceno 2003)—in which, still, much of the care responsibilities are left to, and privately managed by, the family—this particular framing further reinforces a traditional view on family relations and a gendered division of labour, for which women are mainly considered in relation to their performance of (unpaid) care work. Moving from words to deeds, when the League entered government in 2018, it introduced the Ministry of Family<sup>14</sup> and appointed Lorenzo Fontana as minister, who belongs to the most conservative and Catholic faction within the League.<sup>15</sup> Minister Fontana's condemnation of positions on homosexuality, LGBTI rights and immigration are well known and summarised in his book »The cradle of civilisation. At the origin of the crisis« (La culla vuota della civiltà. All'origine della crisi), in which he justified chauvinist social and demographic policies on the basis of cultural supremacism, namely, the assumption that the (traditional) values of Italian culture are superior—in the sense of morally correct—to the values of other, foreign cultures. Before leaving government in 2019, the League also presented a draft for a bill to reform the Family Law (no. 735, known as the »Pillon Decree«, named after its proponent), following up on one of the pledges illustrated in the League's election manifesto. The proposal included new rules for couples intending to divorce, such as mediation, counselling and equal access to children's custody as a way to »promote both parental figures, including the father figure«. <sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Pillon

<sup>13</sup> Fifty-eight years-old instead of 68-years-old; only after reaching 35 contribution years.

<sup>14</sup> A dedicated Ministry of Family was absent from Italian government since 1994, with the exception of the centre-left Prodi government between 2006–2008 (see: <http://www.governo.it/it/i-governi-dal-1943-ad-oggi/xviii-legislatura-dal-23-marzo-2018/governo-conte-ii/12715>; last accessed 7.2.2021).

<sup>15</sup> See: <https://www.ilsolo24ore.com/art/fontana-giura-18-ministrogli-affari-ue-leghista-locatelli-famiglia-AC1ACrX> (last accessed 5.6.2020).

<sup>16</sup> See: *Lega Nord*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018. Original quote in Italian, translation by the authors: »Rivisitazione e riforma degli istituti di diritto di famiglia in sede di separazione e divorzio in merito all'affidamento condiviso dei figli nel senso di renderlo effettivo e di assicurare la valorizzazione delle figure genitoriale anche paterna.«

Decree demands that both parents are obliged to provide for minors' direct maintenance. The party's official discourse justifies direct maintenance as a necessary measure to protect the rights of divorced fathers, stating that »there is a serious problem concerning divorced fathers who has been reduced to poverty«. <sup>17</sup> On closer inspection, the measure negatively affects the parent living in more precarious economic and social conditions, who is left without economic support in the case of separation. However, in the Italian context, the gender gap in the labour market, including income and pay gaps, as well as life-work balance conditions are disproportionately affecting women rather than men (ISTAT 2020), meaning that women are more likely to be negatively affected by the law. The Pillon Decree led to a heated debate both within and beyond parliamentary institutions. Following the pressure of feminist movements and the opposition of both the PD and Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) in parliament, the decree was never approved (see section 4).

### Reproductive rights

The centrality of family and birth rates for both parties also influences their positions on reproductive rights. Abortion was legalised in Italy in 1978, through the law 194/1978. After a clamorous attempt at abolishing the law through a referendum in 1981, the law ceased to be a site of open conflict in Italian politics until very recently, even though it has been subject to periodical reform attempts by right-wing parties. However, abortion rights are far from universally guaranteed, as Italy has a very high rate of »conscientious objectors«—doctors refusing to perform abortion for religious or moral beliefs—employed in public hospitals. <sup>18</sup> Both the League and the Fdl do not mention reproductive rights in their manifestos, but they are relevant in their parliamentary activities and the public pronouncements of both their leaders.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Lega Nord*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018. Original quote in Italian: »Su questo, come è risaputo, esiste un grande problema sociale di padri separate ridotti in povertà« (translation by the authors).

<sup>18</sup> See: [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/10/20/news/medici\\_obiettori\\_ecco\\_i\\_dati\\_regione\\_per\\_regione-150182589/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/10/20/news/medici_obiettori_ecco_i_dati_regione_per_regione-150182589/) (last accessed 5.6.2020).

In 2019, the World Congress of Family took place in Verona (Pavan 2020).<sup>19</sup> On this occasion, both Meloni and Salvini were invited to give a speech. This led to heated discussions for Salvini, who, at the time, had governmental responsibility as Minister for Internal Affairs. Their interventions at the congress showed a different inclination: Salvini did not question abortion rights but wished a reduction of the abortion rate; instead, Meloni claimed that »L.194 has been only partially implemented«, leaving aside the most important part of it, that is, abortion prevention.<sup>20</sup> In Meloni's view, the law 194 should allow termination of pregnancy for strictly necessary cases, but, most of all, should grant women with the right to be mothers and guarantee child's rights.

Beyond public statements, worrisome evidence of restrictive policies on reproductive rights has become apparent through the institutional activities of both parties: League Minister of Family Pillon already claimed at his appointment to office in 2018 that »today there are not the conditions to change law 194, but we will get there the same way it happened in Argentina«. <sup>21</sup> At the local level, the League proposed a motion at the city council of Verona to provide financial support to Catholic associations implementing initiatives against abortion. The motion, called *Verona città per la vita* (Verona, pro-life city), was approved with a majority of votes in February 2018. <sup>22</sup> With the same intent, in October of the same year, the Fdl group in the city council of Rome presented a similar proposal, receiving the direct support of the party leader, Giorgia Meloni. The proposal's goal was to

<sup>19</sup> The World Congress of Family is an American-based, international coalition of Christian right-wing organisations. It promotes pro-life and pro-family positions, while strongly opposing same-sex marriage, LGBT rights, and abortion. Since 2012, it has been organising annual conferences in different countries all over the world.

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzu8I5G8B6E> (last accessed 19.2.2021). Video of the speech of Giorgia Meloni at the 2019 World Congress of Family in Verona.

<sup>21</sup> See: [https://www.corriere.it/politica/18\\_settembre\\_10/simone-pillon-chi-figura-spicco-family-day-senatore-leghista-52f700f2-b4d8-11e8-9795-182d8d9833a0.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/politica/18_settembre_10/simone-pillon-chi-figura-spicco-family-day-senatore-leghista-52f700f2-b4d8-11e8-9795-182d8d9833a0.shtml) (last accessed 19.2.2021). Original quote in Italian: »Oggi non ci sono le condizioni per cambiare la 194, ma ci arriveremo come è successo in Argentina« (translation by the authors). A reform to legalise abortion in Argentina was initially approved by the Argentinian Parliament and rejected by the Senate in 2018, causing much political debate and mobilisation of feminist movements in the country. Two years later, the reform was approved on 30.12.2020.

<sup>22</sup> See: [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/10/05/news/consiglio\\_comunale\\_verona\\_aborto-208223679/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/10/05/news/consiglio_comunale_verona_aborto-208223679/) (last accessed 10.6.2020).

declare Rome »a pro-life city« and to push forward pro-family policies, as well as special funding for anti-abortion organisations, at the local level. Nonetheless, the proposal was rejected in the capital's city council, governed by the M5S.<sup>23</sup>

### Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is another relevant topic for both parties, although only the League makes explicit reference to it in its electoral manifesto. The framework in which it is inscribed revolves around the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the respective strategic national plan against gender-based violence (2017–2020). As reported in the League's manifesto, the major problems affecting the current legislations refer to the long timing of criminal procedures, the severity of the sentences (which should be increased), and the protection programmes for the victims (which should be expanded). <sup>24</sup> Interestingly, both parties voted in favour of the Convention's ratification within the national parliament in 2013, contrary to the behaviour of many far-right parties in Europe, which explicitly opposed the ratification of Istanbul convention and generally avoid speaking about gender-based violence. Different dynamics occurred at the European level, when the European parliament ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2019: only the League voted in favour, along with Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) and the M5S. The Fdl, instead, voted against the ratification. In explaining why they voted down the convention, the MEP Nicola Procaccini declared that the text was »imbued with gender ideology that introduces an incredible series of sexual categories and subcategories, a real betrayal of the Istanbul Convention and symbol of the ideological drift of the European Parliament«. <sup>25</sup> This about-turn in Fdl's support for the Convention (notably at the European and national levels) from 2013 to 2019 can be attributed to the increased politicisation of »gender

<sup>23</sup> See: [https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/10/22/news/aborto\\_194\\_mozione\\_fratelli\\_d\\_italia-209663520/](https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/10/22/news/aborto_194_mozione_fratelli_d_italia-209663520/) (last accessed 10.6.2020).

<sup>24</sup> See: *Lega Nord*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018.

<sup>25</sup> See: <https://europa.today.it/attualita/deriva-gender-procaccini.html> (last accessed 16.6.2020). Original quote in Italian: »A un testo impregnato di ideologia gender che introduce una incredibile serie di categorie e sottocategorie sessuali, un vero e proprio tradimento della convezione di Istanbul e simbolo della deriva ideologica del Parlamento Europeo« (translation by the authors).

ideology« in the European landscape, and the party's subsequent radicalisation around this issue (see the discussion around gender ideology). On the other hand, particularly in League's discourse and practices, the attention to gender-based violence and the few instances of promotion of women's rights can be understood in relations to the strong anti-immigration discourse adopted by the party. This process that has been defined as the racialisation of sexism (Scrinzi 2014a), a mechanism based on representing migration as a threat to women of national origins. As Sara Farris notes, in the League's discourse migrant men—especially Islamic men but also Eastern Europeans—are generally depicted as misogynists and potential harassers. Conversely, migrant women are seen as passive victims of gender-based violence (2019: 60–61). It is evident that the strategic promotion of anti-gender violence legislation, women's autonomy and gender equality has become part of the League's anti-Islam discourse (Farris 2019).

### LGBTI rights

All explicit and implicit references to gender in the manifestos entail a biologically determined and binary conception of it. LGBTI rights are almost never directly addressed in the manifestos, with the exception of the League's, which clearly positions itself against »gay adoptions« and notably against the substitution of the traditional figures of parenthood, the »mother« and »father«, with gender-neutral ones. As the 2018 electoral manifesto reads: »The State protects the identity of the parents also by safeguarding specific names: in all official documents, in the forms of the bodies and in any document that has public value, the only references allowed will be those of »mother«, »father«, »husband and wife«. Generic terms such as »parent 1« or »parent 2« will not be considered valid or will be admitted in any way.«<sup>26</sup>

Reiterated public statements by the party's leader Matteo Salvini well summarise the official position of the party on LGBTI rights: the party tolerates homo-

<sup>26</sup> See: *Lega Nord*, electoral manifesto national elections 2018. Original quote in Italian: "Lo Stato tutela l'identità dei genitori anche attraverso la salvaguardia dei nomi specifici: in tutti gli atti ufficiali, nella modulistica degli enti e in ogni documento che abbia valenza pubblica gli unici riferimenti ammessi saranno quelli a »madre«, »padre«, »marito« e »moglie«. Non saranno ritenuti validi né in alcun modo ammessi termini generici come »genitore 1« o »genitore 2« (translation by the authors).

sexuality as a free choice of individuals, but it vehemently and clearly opposes the recognition of same-sex families, adoption by same-sex parents, and maternity by surrogacy. Lately, on the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (17.5.2020), Salvini tweeted: »I always believed in liberty. Everyone has the right to love, kiss, and live with whom she/he wants. Without discrimination in the street, at school, at work, everywhere. (...) The only issue I will never change my mind about are children: gay adoptions and uteri for rent will never have my agreement, children need a mother and a father.«<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Meloni had already claimed during an event organised by the national LGBTI association Arcigay in 2009—when she was minister for youth policies under Berlusconi's government—that she would commit herself and her party to fight homophobia. Yet, following the same argument as Salvini, she recently claimed that being against discrimination for homosexual people does not equal to be in favour of adoptions, surrogacy practices and switching to gender-neutral labels such as »parent 1 and 2«.

The theme of surrogacy has been largely advocated against by both parties. They described surrogacy as a practice that would breach human rights and notably women's rights and their dignity. In January 2020, the European Parliament rejected an amendment proposed by Simona Baldassare, the League's MEP, to condemn maternal surrogacy as a violation of human rights.<sup>28</sup> The major implications of such stances are twofold: at the policy level, it perpetuates the eternal stalemate for the approval of a national law against homophobia, while also preventing the advancement of other policies concerning adoption and gender-neutral language. At the social and political level, it mirrors a continuous attack on LGBTI rights, the LGBTI community—depicted as the »gay lobby«—and notably same-sex families.

<sup>27</sup> See: Salvini's Tweet; available at: <https://twitter.com/matteo-salvinimi/status/1262008100539838468?s=20> (last accessed 22.2.2021). Original text in Italian: »Io credo nella Libertà, sempre. E quindi credo che ognuno abbia il diritto di amare chi vuole, di baciare chi vuole, di vivere con chi vuole. Senza discriminazioni in strada, a scuola, sul lavoro, ovunque. L'unico tema su cui non cambierò mai idea riguarda i bambini: adozioni gay e uteri in affitto non mi vedranno mai d'accordo, ai bimbi servono una mamma ed un papà« (translation by the authors).

<sup>28</sup> See: <https://secolo-trentino.com/2020/01/17/lue-e-la-sinistra-non-si-oppongono-allutero-in-affitto-pe-respinge-emendamento-lega/> (last accessed 14.6.2020).

Another area in which both parties have been particularly vocal is education. This is linked to the idea that parents, by the constitution, hold the supreme right to educate their children according to their own ideals and traditions. Both parties have been actively fighting the introduction, or have been promoting the elimination, of gender and sexual education in primary and secondary school programmes. This is linked to the broader attack against gender theory and gender ideology, which would be primarily diffused and used as a tool of manipulation and indoctrination of children through educational programmes.

### Women's support for Populist Radical Right Parties in Italy

When the literature refers to PRR parties as *Männerparteien* (men's parties), it points to the fact that, in these parties, men are often over-represented: among voters, rank-and-file, elected officials and, mostly important, in leadership positions (for a discussion see Mudde 2007). Moreover, research on radical groups showed that women's participation in these organisations is often considered gregarious and passive, merely the result of the socialisation in far-right groups through family and partners (Blee 1996). Even if it is true that men still dominate the far right overall (Mudde 2019), generalisation should be avoided: especially in Western Europe there is clear evidence that women are increasingly voting, supporting and getting involved in the activities of such parties (Mayer 2013; Meret 2015; Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Snipes and Mudde 2019), as demonstrated by the fact that many far-right parties, from the Front National to the Italian Brothers of Italy are, in fact, led by female leaders.

In this section, we analyse women's participation in, and support for, the League and the FdI. We will analyse the descriptive representation of women in parliament and in the organisational structure of both parties, as well as the gender gap in electoral support, including all relevant parties on the left-right spectrum in comparison. This evidence is to be interpreted in the context of Italian politics, in which women's political participation is generally low by European standards. Despite improvements over the years—mainly due to the joint effects of societal change and

the timid implementation of gender representation policies—gender equality in representative institutions is far from being achieved. Many stereotypes persist about women's expertise as politicians (Campus 2010) and women still encounter many hurdles in entering the public sphere (Belluati et al. 2020).

### Women in party organisation and parliament

According to party regulations, all Italian parties should include a »gender clause« in their party statute, formally committing their organisation to pursue women's inclusion and fostering their participation. Accordingly, both the FdI and the League symbolically commit to this requirement. The League even commits to ensuring gender balance at all levels of its internal organisation.<sup>29</sup> As expected, these commitments remain predominantly symbolic. The analysis revealed that men are by far overrepresented in the internal structure of both parties. Looking at the composition of the executive bodies—elected by the general party congresses every five years—three out of 29 members of the National Executive (*Esecutivo nazionale*) in the FdI and two out of 30 members in the League Federal Council (*Consiglio Federale*) are women. Furthermore, the League's Federal Secretary (*Segreteria Federale*), the office that directly supports the leader's activities, is exclusively composed of men (nine out of nine).<sup>30</sup> In the case of FdI, women are more involved in the party central structure, as they are found at the top in about 20 per cent of the party's »thematic areas«, namely the party internal policy working groups. The distribution remains quite gendered, as we find that women are mainly involved in and responsible for those that are usually considered »women's issues«: education, equality, family and non-negotiable values, violence against women, health.

If women still struggle to access top positions in party organisations, the share of women in parliamentary

<sup>29</sup> See: *Statute Fratelli d'Italia* 2019; available at [https://www.fratelli-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Statuto\\_registrato\\_il\\_31.10.19.pdf](https://www.fratelli-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Statuto_registrato_il_31.10.19.pdf) (last accessed 7.2.2021); *Statute Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* 2019; available at: [https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/statuto/LN\\_Statuto\\_2021.pdf](https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/statuto/LN_Statuto_2021.pdf) (last accessed 7.2.2021).

<sup>30</sup> All information is derived from the authors' elaborations from the information provided through party websites. For the FdI, see: <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/esecutivo-nazionale-2/> (last accessed 27.5.2020). For the League, see: <https://www.leganord.org/il-movimento/organi-federali> (last accessed 7.2.2021).

groups has positively evolved over time (→ **Table 1**). In 2013, only 11 per cent of elected representatives in the lower chamber of the Parliament (the Chamber of Deputies) were women, for both parties. In the case of the FdI, who first entered parliament in 2013, the only women MP was Giorgia Meloni, the future leader of the party. In 2018, female representatives increased to 27 per cent in the League and to 31 per cent in the FdI, respectively. These improvements are certainly due to the effect of the 50 per cent gender quotas measures for candidates' list, which were introduced into electoral law in 2017. Notwithstanding this improvement, both parties still lag behind other parties elected in 2018, having the lowest shares of female MPs. In addition, both parties are not supporters of gender-balanced representation, and strongly oppose gender quotas, which they frame as discriminatory mechanisms. This position clearly emerged during the discussion of the national electoral law approved in 2017, which enforced gender quotas at the national level. In a public intervention on the electoral reform, the FdI leader Giorgia Meloni stated that quotas »are a wrong answer to a good question« because they force parties to override meritocratic and partisans' criteria in candidates' selection.<sup>31</sup>

TABLE 1

The number of elected female MPs after National elections (2013, 2018), mayor political parties

Party	2018 women/total	%	2013 women/total	%
<i>Forza Italia</i> (Go Italy!)	38/104	36	26/98	27
<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i> (Brothers of Italy)	10/35	31	1/9	11
<i>Lega (Nord)</i> (Northern League)	34/125	27	2/18	11
<i>Liberi e Uguali</i> (Free and Equals)	4/14	29	11/37*	30
<i>Movimento 5 Stelle</i> (Five Star Movement)	95/222	43	37/109	34
<i>Partito Democratico</i> (Democratic Party)	36/111	32	111/297	37

Sources: Authors' elaboration from Camera dei Deputati (2013); Froio and Gattinara (2019)

Notes: Data report figures for the beginning of the parliamentary term, and refer the Parliament's lower chamber.

\*: data refers to the predecessor party Left, Ecology and Liberty

<sup>31</sup> See: »Giorgia Meloni: I dream of a meritocratic revolution for Italian women, not a future of gender quotas«; available at: <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/2013/10/16/partiti-meloni-per-le-donne-italiane-sogno-rivoluzione-del-merito-non-futuro-di-quote/> (last accessed 8.6.2020). Original quote in Italian »le quote sono una risposta sbagliata ad una domanda giusta« (translation by the authors).

Beyond women's presence in the organisational structure of the parties, another relevant indicator of women's involvement in party life is the presence of ancillary organisations, or women wings. The FdI does not have a women's wing, nor did its preceding party, the National Alliance (Morini 2007). Concerning the League, previous studies have underlined that the party structure follows a clear distribution of labour between men and women, which conforms with the party's understanding of traditional gender roles. Referring to the League under Umberto Bossi's leadership, Francesca Scrinzi noted that »men and women are socialised and oriented towards party activities in a gendered manner« (Scrinzi 2014b: 170). In other words, men are usually involved in »hard politics« matters, while women are often operating in the background, being mainly in charge of organisational and administrative activities. As an example of the gendered division of labour, the League counts on a women's association called Padanian Women (*Donne Padane*), founded in 1998 by the former party leader, who sought to attract women voters. Its activities are mainly cultural and social, rather than political, and tend to follow the model of feminised care work. For example, the association engaged with activities of child protection and humanitarian aid. Additionally, it contributes to the outreach of the self-defined »Padanian culture« through the organisation of debates and cultural events, emulating the traditional structure of the web of Catholic associations which once had strongholds in the Northern regions (Scrinzi 2014a). Once the party abandoned its separatist goals and shifted to a nationalist agenda, the association provided an arena for the discussion of the party's new relevant themes, from migration to reproductive rights. Overall, the role of the organisation remained marginal (Avanza 2008).

In addition, the League used to have another women's organisation, the Female Political Group (*Gruppo Politico Femminile*), founded in 2006. This group had a more political nature, as it was formed by women who held political and institutional responsibilities—mainly elected representatives and party cadres—and it was strongly connected to their personal needs as party representatives (Scrinzi 2014: 70). In fact, the group nearly disappeared when the League lost almost

all of its female MPs as a result of the 2013 elections. Before this quiescence, the group devoted its attention to many topics: women's labour conditions and work-life balance guarantees; it promoted some draft bills concerning natality, the introduction of stronger penalties for gender violence-based crimes and child abuse. As noted above, the League's discourse on defence of women's right is linked to issues of migration and crimes, and its women's organisation reproduced the same femonationalist discourse (ibid.).

Last but not least, the FdI stands out because it is led by a woman, Giorgia Meloni. Female leadership is not so uncommon in Western European PRR parties, some of the usual examples being the French *Rassemblement National*, the Danish People's party and the Norwegian Progress Party. Contrary to the more (in)famous case of Marine Le Pen, Meloni does not have family ties to previous leadership figures of the right. As she often pointed out in interviews and talks, she has simply been an activist throughout her life—she was the president of the party's youth organisation before entering parliament in 2006—and gained the respect of her peers.<sup>32</sup> It is worth pointing out that no other major political party in Italy is led by a woman and that this fact indisputably offers Giorgia Meloni significant media visibility. Because of her leadership position, Giorgia Meloni is often summoned to discuss all sorts of issues of »hard politics«, subverting the mediatic segregation usually reserved to other female politicians in national media (Molfinio 2014).<sup>33</sup> As noted by Chiara Moroni in her study on Meloni's media representation, two aspects are emphasised in her communication: her political activity and her experience of motherhood. The latter aspect tends to balance what would otherwise be a very energetic and masculine self-representation, oriented towards showing competence (Moroni 2017). Meloni's leadership traits have contributed to renewing the image of the party and are certainly playing a role in increasing the electoral support for the party.

<sup>32</sup> See her last interview on the official FdI YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOxrD6TihXU> (last accessed 7.2.2021).

<sup>33</sup> Mediatic segregation refers to the fact that women politicians are predominantly invited to television or radio shows to discuss a small range of gendered topics (for example education, social policies, gender equality).

### Women's electoral support

Recent evidence seems to signal a mitigation of the voting gender gap for populist Radical Right parties in Europe. To explain this changing trend, researchers have explored explanations both on the demand and the supply side. For example, as early as in 2015, Spierings and Zaslove (2015) did not find any consistent cross-country pattern related to gender attitudes that can explain the voting gap. What they found, instead, is that the main factor explaining support for populist radical right, the opposition to immigration, is common to women and men. Other authors have explored the impact of organisational factors, finding that the presence of a female leader could increase PRR parties' chances to reach a broader electorate (Meyer 2013; for a discussion see Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Botti and Corsi 2018).

Comparing the gender gap in far-right voting across national (2013 and 2018) and European (2019) elections, we can see that, also in Italy, the gap has and is narrowing over time, and that no significant differences exist between far-right parties and other relevant parties (→ **Table 2**). In 2013, only around 37 per cent of FdI voters were women, whereas in 2018 the ratio of women supporters rose to 48.5 per cent, reaching perfect parity (50.0 per cent) in the EU elections in which the party achieved its best electoral performance so far, gaining around 6.5 per cent of the votes. Women voting for the League also increased over time: in 2013 they constituted around 40 per cent of the total League electorate, and the gap progressively closed in the 2018 national and 2019 European elections (47.5 per cent).<sup>34</sup> Overall, there is no strong evidence of a gender gap in support for both the FdI and the League. Contrary to other previous research, which found that extreme-right parties are simply a more radical version of centre-right parties when it comes to voters' behaviour (Spierings and Zaslove 2015), the two parties perform better by this metric than the closer centre-right party *Forza Italia* (Go Italy!), which recorded a higher gender gap in voting support in all three elections.

We can provide some tentative interpretation to account for the increased support for far-right parties by women voters in Italy. First of all, it should be

<sup>34</sup> Readers should keep in mind that we are drawing our analysis on descriptive statistics from survey data.

**TABLE 2** Ratio of supporters by gender in 2018 National elections

Party	% men vote 2019	% women vote 2019	% men vote 2018	% women vote 2018	% men vote 2013	% women vote 2013
<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i> (Brothers of Italy)	50.0	50.0	51.5	48.5	62.5	37.5
<i>Lega per Salvini</i> (The League for Salvini)	52.3	47.7	50.8	49.2	59.1	40.9
<i>Forza Italia</i> (Go Italy!)	57.5	42.5	60.7	39.3	54.1	45.9
<i>Movimento 5 Stelle</i> (Five Star Movement)	50.0	50.0	50.00	50.00	48.1	51.9
<i>Più Europa</i> (More Europe)	46.7	53.3	44.8	55.2	n/a	n/a
<i>Partito Democratico</i> (Democratic Party)	48.4	52.6	50.8	49.2	52.7	47.3
<i>Liberi e Uguali*</i> (Free and Equals)	57.1	42.9	47.40	52.50	51.1	48.8
<i>Potere al Popolo</i> (Power to the People)	n/a	n/a	38.27	61.73	n/a	n/a
Did not vote	39.3	59.7	30.37	69.63	54.5	45.4

Source: Authors' elaboration from Schmitt et al. (2019); ITANES (2018); ITANES (2013).

\*: for 2013, data refers to the predecessor party Left, Ecology and Liberty; for 2019, data refers to the electoral coalition »The Left«.

highlighted that both parties constantly increased their voter share over the years, signalling their increased popularity with the broader electorate. Their increasing popularity has potentially mainstreamed and legitimised the parties' positions, to the extent that social groups—such as women—traditionally more reluctant in supporting radical positions, no longer perceive it as taboo to vote for such parties. For the FdI, the leadership of Giorgia Meloni has also played a role: not only has she contributed to deradicalising the image of an otherwise very masculine party, but her personal commitment to guarantee higher social protection to women and mothers most likely bore fruit in attracting women voters. Second, anti-immigration positions are considered key determinants for support to populist and far-right parties (Spierings and Zaslove 2015). Both the FdI and the League have massively addressed and condemned migration, framing it a source of social insecurity and as a threat to public order, including to women's security.

### Counter-Movements and Successful Strategies: Between Feminism and the Invisible Left

Reactions to the far-right conservative agenda on gender and family issues, and sexual and reproductive rights involve both civil society actors and social movements, as well as progressive and secular parties.

A striking majority of public mobilisation and protests were led by the feminist movement No One Less (*Non Una di Meno*, *NUDM*), which set up the strongest and most vocal response. It also has the largest number of participants and supporters. Borrowing its name from the Argentinian movement *Ni Una Menos*, *NUDM* is a transfeminist movement<sup>35</sup> active in Italy since 2016. It works to combat male violence against women and all forms of gender-based violence, for the defence of reproductive rights, and the recognition of the caregiving role played by women within the domestic sphere. One of the main features of the movement is its high mobilisation capacity across issues and actors within the civil society along with the use of direct actions. Such high mobilisation capacity is possible due to the loose structure of the movement, built on the basis of a diffuse territorial network across the entire country. The network of the movement's respective local nodes allows for the implementation of direct actions, as well as alliance building with other political and grassroots organisations active at the local level. Another important characteristic of the movement rests in its ability to produce and diffuse counter-narratives and knowledge, notably through the »Feminist Plan to combat all forms

<sup>35</sup> In the words of Emi Koyama, the founder of the term: »Transfeminism embodies feminist coalition politics in which women of different backgrounds stand up for each other (...)« (2001). The full text of »The Transfeminist Manifesto« is available at: <http://eminism.org/readings/pdf-rdg/tfmanifesto.pdf> (last accessed 17.8.2020).

of gender-based violence«.<sup>36</sup> One of the core aims of the Plan, which focuses on several thematic areas, is to address the systemic, structural character of gender-based violence at the intersection with multiple social and cultural inequalities (Pavan and Mainardi 2018; Pavan 2020).

When referring to the strategies adopted by the movement, it is important to situate them in the framework of movement and countermovement dynamics, in which we should consider not only the two right-wing populist parties and other political forces of the far right, notably the neo-fascist *Forza Nuova* (New Force, FN), but most importantly the cluster of religious (Catholic) actors within the Italian context, which form part of what has been defined as the traditionalist movement (Lavizzari 2020: 64) and, in fact, are the main actors responsible for the spreading of anti-gender campaigns in Italy. The Italian traditionalist movement is a network of diverse religion-based associations united by their pro-life, anti-abortion and anti-gender stances. Some of them are extremely powerful, linked to the Vatican, and have maintained a historical presence in Italy, such as *Forum delle Associazioni Familiari* (Forum of Families Associations), *Movimento per la Vita* (Movement for Life), *Alleanza Cattolica* (Catholic Alliance). Others are newly established, founded in recent years with the specific goal to counter the diffusion of »gender theory and ideology« in society, in schools, and to campaign against LGBTI rights and in support of the natural family. Among these are *La Manif Pour Tous Italia – Generazione Famiglia* (LMPTI – Generation Family), directly inspired by its French counterpart, and the *Comitato Difendiamo i Nostri Figli* (Committee to Defend our Children), promoter of major events such as the Family Day.

Clearly, not all the actions and strategies adopted by *NUDM* are reactive to the traditionalist and radical-right front. On the contrary, as mentioned, the transfeminist movement has been able to build and implement a comprehensive strategy, as laid out in the Feminist Plan, in which it engages with a broad range of issues, such as legal and juridical aspects, health

<sup>36</sup> Original title in Italian »Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere«. The Feminist Plan is available on the *NUDM* website, at: [https://nonunadimeno.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/abbiamo\\_un\\_piano.pdf](https://nonunadimeno.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/abbiamo_un_piano.pdf) (last accessed 8.6.2020).

and reproductive rights, education, work and welfare, migration, and environmental sustainability. Yet, in dealing with these issues, the movement has directly responded to radical right and conservative attacks on gender equality and politics more broadly, especially in the last couple of years, a period which coincides with the League's entrance into national government. Throughout the last two years, the movement has put constant pressure on the national political agenda to protest against the Pillon Decree. At the same time, the movement has also been highly active in countering the League's attempts to intervene in the educational setting, who notably tried to prevent the introduction of or eliminate sexual and gender education in schools. Another topical moment was the mass mobilisation of 30.3.2019 on the occasion of the World Congress of Families (WCF), organised by the International Organization for the Family between 29–31.3., in Verona, a city considered a stronghold both for Catholicism and the League. Salvini and Meloni both participated in the Congress.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond these specific events and other activities at the local level, *NUDM* has been regularly mobilising through mass protests at the national level twice a year: on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and on March 8, during International Women's Day. In addition, as part of a broader strategy that sees intersectional struggles at its core—migration, environment, security—the movement mobilised in reaction to salient political events such as the Global Climate Strike of 25.9.2020, the Security Decree approved by the coalition government between the M5S and the League as well as other small-scale marches for migrants' rights, LGBTI rights, and many others.

For the analysis of progressive parties' counter-strategies in Italy, it is important to stress one element to clarify the specificities of the Italian political landscape and system: It never underwent a complete secularisation process following the dissolution of the Christian Democrats in 1994. This implies that although a confessional party no longer exists, Catholics' votes are represented in different parties both on the left

<sup>37</sup> For a concise explanation of the WCF, its internal organisation, participants, and the political conflict around it during its edition of 2019, see Elena Pavan (2020).

and the right. According to the »Catholic diaspora« model (Lavizzari and Prearo 2019), political candidates with a salient religious identity would function as spokespeople of different religious associational and institutional realities by defending the so-called »non-negotiable values«—especially on bioethics and sexual morality—within mainstream parties' policies. This type of dynamic makes the implementation of progressive policies with respect to gender equality issues extremely difficult, particularly the ones considered as non-negotiable in moral terms, such as same-sex marriage, adoption, etc. In this sense, it is important to remember that Italy scores low in comparison to other European countries in terms of LGBTI rights (ILGA Europe 2019), with still high levels of homo- and transphobia, discrimination and the perpetual governmental inability to enact policies to combat it.<sup>38</sup>

It is against this backdrop that we should try to understand the strategies adopted by the PD, the major Italian centre-left party, and those adopted by minor parties of the left. Following Tim Bale and colleagues' (2010) framework to explore the responses of the mainstream parties of the left to populist radical right challenges, we can identify two major trends.<sup>39</sup> The first is the strategy adopted by the PD over the years, which consisted of holding its position on gender issues, notably with respect to LGBTI rights in the context of the competitive struggle over the civil union partnerships and broadly as passive promoter of gender and sexual diversity, as well as supporting women's representation in politics and society.

The major difficulty in maintaining this strategy is based in the political and historical roots of the party itself. Founded in 2007, the PD emerged through the merging of previous political parties and combined both the Socialist, secularist and the Christian-democratic traditions of its predecessors. This specific configuration influenced the party's stances on moral and ethical issues, which rest on the basis of many internal frictions impeding the party not only to curb populist radical right parties from getting the upper hand on such issues, but also to adopt a consistent and coherent

<sup>38</sup> See <https://www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope/2020> (last accessed 19.2.2021). Italy is placed number 35 out of 49 countries in terms of LGBTI rights examined by the Rainbow Index 2020.

<sup>39</sup> See: <https://www.partitodemocratico.it/wp-content/uploads/d2fd1f91-96df-4808-8f89-600f3148f3e2> (last accessed 15.5.2020).

progressive line in terms of policies.<sup>40</sup> For instance, the adoption of the Cirinnà law on civil partnerships in June 2016 was introduced by the PD government and came after over twenty years of discussion and failed attempts; it does not recognise the full range of rights accorded to a »traditional marriage«. Moreover, the push on behalf of Matteo Renzi's government to implement the law almost appeared to be an »emergency provision« rather than an illustration of the party's progressive stances. The European Union and notably the European Court of Human Rights both condemned Italy in 2015 and forced the country to create a legal framework for the recognition of same sex couples' rights. However, because of its internal divisions, it is worth recognising the efforts made by several party candidates in actively promoting and designing progressive policies, such as civil partnerships, the law for which was named after Monica Cirinnà, a PD senator. Along these lines, other PD members working in the Senate (the second chamber of the Italian Parliament) Commission of Justice have been firm in opposing restrictive policies (e.g., the Pillon Decree) and asking for their withdrawal.<sup>41</sup> More recently and importantly, the PD's deputy Alessandro Zan proposed a new bill for the implementation of an ad hoc law against homophobia and transphobia, marking a historical moment in Italy's history (the text was approved by the Commission of Justice on 14.7.2020 and began to be discussed in Parliament in August 2020).<sup>42</sup>

The second trend is represented by the strategy of minor parties on the left of the political spectrum. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that the PD has suffered from many party splits since 2015, particularly from the leftist factions, thus contributing to the further weakening of the progressive push of the party on such issues. The defection of several members from the party's left wing led to the creation of smaller spin-off parties, notably *Possibile* and *Liberi e Uguali* (formed after the coalition between *Articolo Uno* and *Sinistra Italiana*).

<sup>40</sup> See: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2020-lgbti-equality\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-lgbti-equality_en.pdf) (last accessed 15.5.2020).

<sup>41</sup> See: [http://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/frame.jsp?tipodoc=SommComm&leg=18&id=1107274&part=doc\\_dc-sedetit\\_isr:2](http://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/frame.jsp?tipodoc=SommComm&leg=18&id=1107274&part=doc_dc-sedetit_isr:2) (last accessed 7.2.2021).

<sup>42</sup> See: <https://www.camera.it/leg18/126?tab=8leg=18&idDocumento=0569> (last accessed 7.2.2020). In Italy, discriminatory practices (notably hate speech) were regulated by the Mancino Law and included characteristics such as nationality, ethnicity and religion. Discrimination against gender identity and sexual orientation was not included and never regulated so far, despite a few attempts in the past.

With respect to the themes addressed in this report, *Possibile*, led by Giuseppe Civati, represents the party that has shown a most consistent support and engagement with equality issues in general: it uses feminist symbols and openly declares itself as a feminist party.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the PD, the strategy adopted by *Possibile* has been more affirmative in terms of countering, if not vocally opposing, the League's and the FdI's positions on equality issues. However, the political weight of *Possibile*, as of other smaller parties on the left, has not proven enough to create sufficient pressure with regard to these topics. This has subsequently left Italian progressive parties considerably behind with respect to other European counterparts, such as Portugal's PS or Spain's PSO.

Finally, we should stress that in Italy trade unions do not play a central role in countering the far-right on gender issues, as they struggle to build alliances and active support around such struggles, notably with respect to the feminist movement.

<sup>43</sup> See: <https://www.possibile.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ManifestoPossibile160917.pdf> (last accessed 15.5.2020).

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## IMPRINT

2021

ISBN 978-3-96250-864-7

### Published by:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung • Forum Politik und Gesellschaft  
Hiroshimamastraße 17 • 10785 Berlin

**Author:** Francesca Feo, Anna Lavizzari

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**Translation:** Helen Ferguson

**Design:** Dominik Ziller • DZGN

**Printed by:** Druckerei Brandt GmbH, Bonn

Printed on EnviroPolar, 100 per cent recycled paper, awarded the Blauer Engel award.

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Forum Politik und Gesellschaft  
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The study series *Triumph of the Women? The Female Face of Right-wing Populism and Extremism* can be found online at:

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The publication *Triumph of the women? The Female Face of the Far Right in Europe* (2018) can be found in German and English online at

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